

## MALL

Like Dirk Bogarde  
all decadent in white suit  
a rivulet of mascara down one cheek  
tramping after Tadzia on foot  
through the winding streets of Venice.

The dank stones,  
the filthy canals,  
breastless young girls in front of the walk-in movie  
tonguing vanilla cones.

The clown in the music store  
is playing my tune.  
on the Lowry Teenie Genie. I see  
Bukowski has made it into  
the Cambridge Bookstore.

## MEIER & FRANK

Let's park on the ramp  
go up to the mezzanine  
and buy two cubes of penuche.

How posh I feel  
among the cologne atomizers  
how gauche  
sniffing the scented candles.

It's this ironic perversity  
that's come upon me recently  
of doing and feeling  
as I damn well please.

-- David Barker

Salem, OR

## THE MAN WHO LOVED BOOKS

Even as a child he seemed strange. He could never get enough of being read to at bedtime. "More, Mommie, more!" he piped from under the covers, just as she was about to tiptoe from his bedroom. "Read it again, read it again!" His little hands fluttered like the tongues of baby birds in the nest toward the letters and pictures on the page.

An alphabet print was hanging on the wall above his headboard, the Alice in Wonderland scenes on his curtains flapped in the breeze. Before long he was dragging off his father's sporting magazines and garden supplies catalogues. When she vacuumed the house on Saturday mornings, his mother found piles of them under his bed. She didn't dare tell her husband what she'd seen in their son's bedroom.

Soon he graduated to a public library card for a birthday present. Summers he often spent whole days in the library, sometimes not even coming home for lunch. Whenever he did come, he seemed far away. Once he ground pepper into his milk, once he poured cream gravy into his empty glass, once he buttered his paper napkin. Whenever he stayed at home for part of the day, he could be found sitting on a lawn chair under the maple tree, hunched over a book. He hardly ever did his chore of cutting the grass; his father reduced his weekly allowance. From the kitchen window where she pretended to be washing dishes, his mother tried to make out the titles of his books, but he always managed to keep them covered with a spread-out hand. Eventually the mother and father began to receive overdue notices in the mail. Whenever they confronted him about the fines, he pleaded ignorance and innocence. One day while he was away in the library, his mother found a stack of dusty library books in the corner of his clothes closet. They were about Kit Carson and Daniel Boone and Wild Bill Hickock and Abe Lincoln in Southern Indiana, about Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and The Year We Won the State in Basketball. "But why doesn't he go out and play basketball instead of reading about it?" she grumbled in the closet. She began to worry that he seemed to have no interest in being with boys his own age.

In his high school years, when he should have been practicing football, basketball or baseball after school, he could sometimes be seen sneaking off to the town library. It was rumored that he spent a lot of time in the H section reading juicy passages from the Hemingway novels that were banned from the school library. He even came to school one morning mumbling about "doing it in a sleeping bag in Spain." Once the town librarian stopped his father on the street and, shaking a finger, complained she'd seen the boy sitting at a table with a girl. They'd been showing one another parts of their favorite books.

Once he left town for college, they all knew he'd never come back home to live. During his freshman year, he rang up a staggering bill buying paperbacks at the college bookstore. Whenever he did condescend to come home for holidays, he lugged along a battered suitcase full of books instead of the dirty laundry his mother was expecting. More than once she was tempted to throw "all that dirt" into

her automatic washer. She began to fear that her oldest son might corrupt his sister and brother who were now at a very impressionable age. They too were beginning to show signs of the strangeness. Especially the sister, who spent whole afternoons in her bedroom reading modern novels he'd left lying around the house.

When he received his diploma and entered graduate school, they all began to understand what they couldn't admit to relatives and neighbors. He was going to make a career of books. He couldn't be cured. They even found out that he took an evening job in a liquor store to support his habit. His eyes began to blur, he got glasses for the first time. Because he feared that novels and biographies and histories were too much of a strain on his eyes, he opted for the compression of poetry. He could easily read ten volumes a day. In only three years, he graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy ("What diseases can he cure?" everyone asked) and had to think about finding a full-time job to support his full-time habit. Before he signed a contract for his first teaching job, he fell in love with a woman who loved books. They decided to pool their paperback libraries and get married. They rented a huge U-Haul truck to drive their books halfway across the country to the town where they'd found jobs.

Soon the man who loved books began to build bookshelves in the study of their new apartment. Unfortunately, his position as Instructor at the local college entitled him to write off to publishers for a free copy of any books he thought he might like to teach. He couldn't stop or be stopped. He spent whole weekends writing to publishers. Every weekday he came home from school with a handful of new books. He began to read in subjects that bore no official relationship to the subject he taught. His colleagues considered him unprofessional, his students joked that he probably made love to first editions. His bookshelves began to invade the bedroom, the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and finally the bathroom. Books lay like dirty dishes all over the apartment. He even laid a row of books in the double bed between himself and the woman who loved books. In the last letter his parents ever received from him, he wrote that he was starting to make a book of his own. They vowed they'd never let it into their house.

-- Norbert Krapf

Roslyn, NY